

Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

Public Service Department Renewable Energy Standard Outreach Session 2

Overview

On September 19, 2023, at 10am the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) held the second of two hybrid (in person and virtual) listening sessions on the Renewable Energy Standard for the Public Service Department (PSD) at CCRPC Offices at 110 W. Canal Street in Winooski. This event was offered in collaboration with Third Act Vermont. Eleven people attended this event.

Most participants were strong proponents of moving fast to reduce emissions regardless of the cost. The group was unanimous against burning wood as a source of electricity, and many did not think Hydro Quebec should be considered renewable. There was a strong concern about multi-family buildings not being able to participate in the benefits of net-metering and the need for state-wide policies to protect low-income residents against increases in electricity rates in the move towards electrified buildings for thermal heating. The group appeared to agree that protecting low-income residents should not be left up to utilities and that public policy, not individual responsibility, is the only way to address the low-income energy burdened households, especially given the climate emergency and the high cost of transitioning to cleaner renewable fuels.

This event was part of the broader effort that the Vermont Public Service Department is conducting to do a comprehensive review of Vermont's renewable and clean electricity policies and programs.

Approach to the Events

For this session, CCRPC collaborated with a point person from Third Act to invite Third Act Vermont members and their contacts to *"a forum that would provide a space to hear from Vermonters about what they value about renewable electricity and what they would like to see from renewable and clean electricity policies and programs in Vermont"*.

The following materials developed by PSD were made available prior to the event via CCRPC's web calendar:

[Event Materials](#) / [Renewable Electricity Policies & Programs in Vermont](#) » / [Where Does Vermont's Electricity Come From?](#) » / [Trade-offs](#) »

During the event CCRPC presented the slides provided by the Public Service Department, asked a series of questions using the Slido dynamic polling app, asked participants to complete a demographic survey and a feedback questionnaire. However, after the first event, CCRPC adjusted the order of the slides to improve the flow of information and reduced the number of polling questions to leave more room for conversation.

Partners

Prior to reaching out to Third Act Vermont, CCRPC contacted the following organizations to see if they would be interested in recruiting participants or being participants in this session: Vermont Environmental Justice Network, Rights and Democracy Vermont, and Vermont Student Climate Coalition. However, we only received a response and interest from Third Act Vermont.

How this was advertised

This event was advertised via direct email to Third Act Vermont members. The event was also made public via the CCRPC's web calendar so members of the public could attend if they became aware of the event via the CCRPC web calendar. Coffee and pastries from Barrio's Bakery in Burlington were provided. Stipends and interpretation services and other accommodations were offered in CCRPC's communication about the event. After speaking with our Third Act contact, it was determined that the group of people attending this event would not need stipends. However, we felt that offering "other accommodations" covers stipends and if a participant needed one to attend the event, they could request a stipend accommodation. CCRPC felt that leaving the stipend open ended was sufficient for this population.

Who attended

This session was led by Melanie Needle, Senior Energy Planner at CCRPC with support from Anne Nelson Stoner, CCRPC Equity & Engagement Manager, and Ann Janda, CCRPC Senior Energy Project Manager. Adam Jacobs, Utilities Economic Analyst from the Vermont Department of Public Service attended to help answer technical questions.

There were 11 participants with 7 attending in-person and 4 attending online via Zoom.

Participant demographic responses:

Genders: 7 men, 4 women

Age: Five participants reported that they were over 60, with the remainder 45-59 (2), 30-44 (1), and 18-29 (1).

Income: Two participants reported earning over \$100,000 last year, one reported earning \$75,000-\$99,999 last year, one reported earning \$50,000-\$74,999, and the rest preferred not to say.

Home ownership: Seven participants reported owning their home, two reported renting their home.

What we heard

CCRPC used Slido to make the meeting interactive, obtain feedback from the participants and to inspire group discussion regarding the answers. The following questions were asked. After each question was completed, the meeting participants discussed the answers. Their comments regarding each question are captured after the discussion of each question below.

1. How important should each of the following be when considering how Vermont gets its electricity?
2. In thinking about the issues you just ranked in Question 1, what is important to you about how you (personally) get renewable or low carbon electricity? Please check the option below that most applies to you.
3. In the future, what would you like this mix to look like? Check all that apply.

4. Going forward, how much would you support Vermont getting its electricity from the following sources?

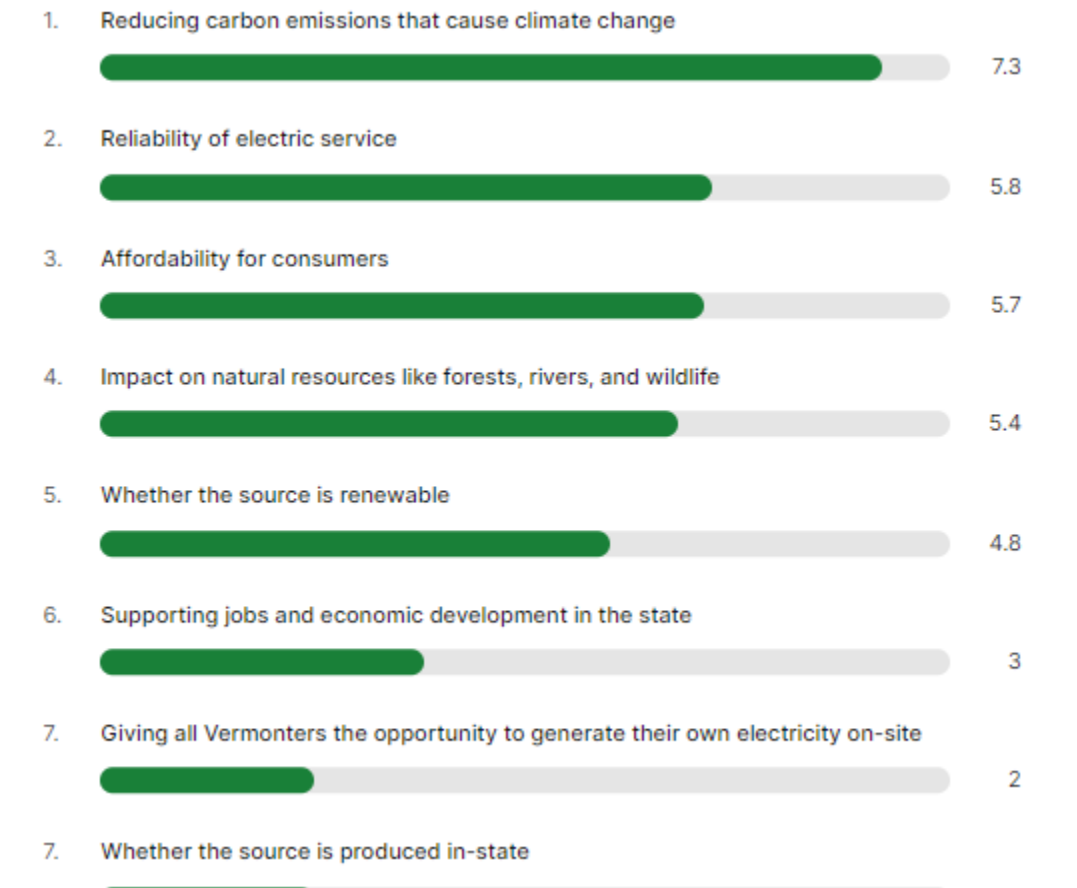
After an introduction and explanation of net-metering, we heard the following comments:

- Single family homes can install enough solar panels to offset the energy load of a house. In multi-family buildings the load is higher, but there is not enough room on the roof for solar panels to meet the energy load of the building. Solar panels on multi-family buildings can only offset 20 to 25% of the load so the only way to get there is via community net-metered solar. [Adam noted this could theoretically be generated at utility level scale]. Net-metering in Burlington, where a majority of affordable housing is built, is especially problematic because there is not sufficient land to site a community solar project adjacent to affordable housing. Moreover, Burlington has its own utility so it's problematic to site a renewable energy facility outside of Burlington in another utilities' territory to offset demand and cost for an affordable housing project in Burlington.
- Must maintain equity for multi-unit housing. [Adam noted that low-income shared tariff is another option.]
- Regarding RECs, when I generate on my roof, what happens? [Adam responded that you can keep or sell compensation via net-metering. The compensation is higher if you give the utility the REC. Utilities cannot sell and must retire net-metered RECs.]
- Regarding wind, we are selling those RECs out of state, so VT doesn't get the credit? And that helps lower electricity rates? [Adam said yes, this can be used to lower rates and is a reason wind RECs are sold. Hydro is less expensive. Wind and large solar do not fit neatly into current definitions to meet Tier 2 requirements. Looking at creating new Tiers to accommodate this.]

After reviewing the types of electricity Vermont utilities generate or buy, we heard the following comments:

- Biomass is contested as renewable in Massachusetts.
- Is the 7% biomass in the pie chart McNeil and Ryegate? [Yes]
- Why is "unspecified" not labeled as gas or oil in the pie chart? This is misleading and not transparent. [Adam noted this slice is mostly oil and gas attributes but usually also include some small % of unclaimed nuclear and older renewable attributes that do not qualify for any New England state compliance obligations, but he said that is good feedback.]
- Do we have more stability in rates due to renewables? [Adam explained that Vermont is the only state in the region that didn't deregulate and can purchase long-term hedges because they have negotiated contracts well in advance, such as Hydro Quebec until 2038. Rates are stable because we did not fully deregulate.]
- Due to lifecycle emissions and upstream issues, are we considering reducing reliance on Hydro Quebec? [Adam said that ANR will be doing lifecycle emissions study and looking at upstream effects. They hope to complete by end of the year.]
- There's a lot we are not counting - we need to account for carbon going into the atmosphere.
- RECs... they are deceptive, almost fraudulent and they misguide consumers. We cannot continue to keep them unbundled.
- We cannot deal with the problem unless we accurately count the problem.

When asked “How important should each of the following be when considering how Vermont gets its electricity?”, the group responded via the Slido dynamic polling app that reducing carbon emissions that cause climate change was the top choice in this ranking question. 12 participants completed this ranking poll question. The participants were asked to drag their highest preference to the top of the list. Through the ordering of the list of preferences, the participants are essentially giving points to each option. The order of the ranking aligns with the points assigned to each option and each question is assigned a ranking score. Once the voting is over, the points for each option are summarized and then divided by the number of people who participated in the ranking poll. This provides an average ranked score for each option and the option with the highest score is the most preferred one.



Comments:

Need to reduce carbon emissions now because:

- Glad PSD is doing these sessions, but it is a crisis, and we are way behind schedule. We need to reduce emissions. Period. It will cost but we have to do it.
- We are a self-selected group. We only have 10 to 20 years to save the planet. Carbon accounting practices are now being exposed as misleading. We have high emissions due to McNeil. Problems with carbon re-uptake by forests
- We have to accurately count the carbon emissions first.
- We can't make decisions based on affordability.

Renewables:

- Biomass emissions shouldn't be excluded from the Clean Heat Standard.
- We are not accounting for all the carbon going into the atmosphere.
- RECs alone don't support renewable energy and misguide consumers.
- Even data we're looking at today isn't clear or accurate and we need to know all the facts to make decisions.
- McNeill is more highly emitting than coal.
- We need new carbon accounting processes.
- Low or no-emission sources:
- We need to get rid of the word renewable, because not all renewables are clean.
- WE NEED EFFICIENCY BUILT INTO THE SYSTEMS
- Incentivize better building codes for new buildings. More efficiency in retrofitting old buildings.
- Solar should be on the rooftop of every flat-topped industrial building (code preventing this)
- Methane and wood contribute to greenhouse gases.
- Hydropower is not just Hydro Quebec - we need to make a clear distinction - large hydro power and river run hydro power needs to be made distinct.

In state vs. out of state:

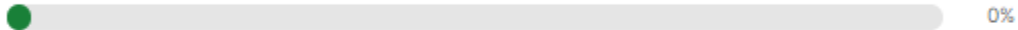
- In state vs. out of state are minor issues. We must include wind. Need every bit of it. Can't blow tops of mountains off in Virginia so we don't have to look at it here.
- We need to all share in the responsibility for this.
- This came up around the wind turbines - "not on our mountaintops" - what are we going to do to carry our own burdens, if we can
- Whether it comes from out of state seems like rearranging the deck chairs. It's not a top priority, it comes later. We have to address the lack of development of wind, it doesn't matter where it comes from.
- How are we going to make progress if we have a public utilities commission that listens to local residents that don't like the look of it?
- How do we keep the PUC from rejecting projects on the basis of aesthetics?

The next question in Slido was "In thinking about the issues you just ranked in Question 1, what is important to you about how you (personally) get renewable or low carbon electricity? Please check the option below that most applies to you." Via Slido, 67% of the respondents answered, "I would prefer to get it from my utility on my behalf". 9 people participated in the poll.

I would prefer to get it from my utility on my behalf - 6 votes



I would prefer to get it entirely from my own on-site system (e.g. "off grid") - 0 votes



I would prefer some combination of getting it from my utility and myself (e.g. net-metering) - 3 votes



I'm not sure - 0 votes

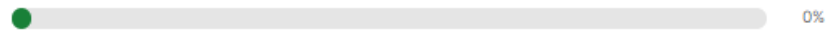


Comments:

- The word "personally" is challenging. Because it is an emergency, we can't make decisions one at a time. GMP is obligated to focus on profits to investors. We can't get there without strong public policy.
- Individual responsibility is how oil companies have brainwashed people. Won't get us there. Can't buy our way out of this. We must be truly carbon free.
- All of us electrifying, so can't plug into a grid that is dirty, such as McNeil.
- We cannot personally make decisions one at a time and get us to a place we need to be.
- GMP is 75%- they must make decisions and their decisions need to make a profit... its not about us personally.
- It's way more efficient for big systems instead of individually putting solar panels on our house. It needs to be structural— it needs to be the energy companies. If they're not going to do it because of shareholders, we're screwed.

When asked, "In the future, what would you like this mix to look like? Check all that apply." 90% of the respondents answered "I would like to see more electricity coming from low or no emissions resources. See the following screenshot for how other options were selected. 10 participants completed this question.

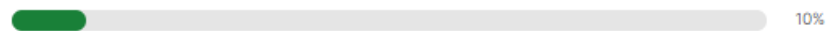
I like the current mix of electricity and don't see the need for any significant changes - 0 votes



I would like to see more electricity coming from low or no-emissions resources - 9 votes



I would like to see more electricity coming from renewable resources - 1 vote



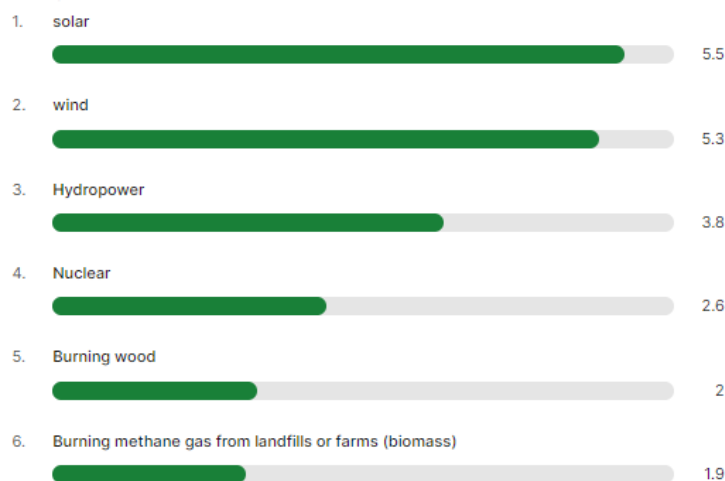
I'm not sure - 0 votes



Comments:

- Lot of potential in offshore wind. Vermont should be looking into long-term contracts. Need to get rid of the term “renewable.”
- Number one reduction through efficiency. Must incentivize better building codes and retrofitting old. Should be solar on every rooftop and can’t just be because the fire department doesn’t want to deal with it.
- France now requires large parking lots to be covered by solar panels.
- We need infill solar.
- Here we all trying to electrify our households, we still have to plug it in to a grid and the grid is still dirty.
- Offshore wind? VT could look into grabbing long-term contracts with offshore wind companies? That would be renewable, but also low or no emissions.

Using Slido we asked, “Going forward, how much would you support Vermont getting its electricity from the following sources?” The group responded with solar as being the top choice, then wind and then hydropower Nuclear, burning wood, and methane were the least popular choices. 8 people participated in this question. This is a ranking poll which scores each answer and then averages the number of points according to the number of participants.



Comments:

- Wood and methane contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Need to distinguish impacts from Hydro Quebec and local hydro.

Equity:

- Low-income energy burden is really high in Vermont
- As we have more and more people using electricity, we don’t have a protection for low-income (PIP- a rate affordability plan) - It’s going to get more and more critical that we have some rate protection. There’s a bill in the legislature, but it hasn’t passed. At a certain income level, they cap how much you pay for electricity, period. In NY, no more than 6% of their income.

- It will help incentivize people to electrify if you know you won't spend more money
- <https://vtdigger.org/2019/12/08/indigenous-activists-fight-expansion-of-canadian-hydropower/>

What the Public Service Department Should know

This group consisted of all white, mostly older climate change activists and a few low-income advocates. Ensuring that low-income residents are not left behind was discussed. There was also a strong sentiment that the information provided about emissions is misleading and not entirely accurate. Regarding the slides "What Electricity do Vermont Utilities Generate or Buy" more granular breakouts were requested as well as, in general, a better way to account for emissions from burning wood and Hydro Quebec.

Reflections on the Process

Feedback surveys and the online chat reflected positive experiences with the event and a desire to attend more. However, one participant felt that too much time was spent on education and not enough on discussion. Another participant wanted more education. Staff felt that the participants in both sessions would have liked longer sessions. Staff also felt that the hybrid (in-person and online) format was extremely challenging, and the online attendees were at a disadvantage because they couldn't hear all the discussion in the room due to CCRPC's challenges with audio from their equipment. Additionally, CCRPC staff felt that the level of information needed to answer the participants questions about various PSD and Public Utility Commission programs and policies was beyond our expertise and was grateful a Public Service Department Staff could attend to answer the more technical questions.

CCRPC Staff also recognizes that all of participants were white, and most were financially secure, which speaks to the many barriers that exist for underrepresented and marginalized communities in participating in community engagement opportunities. There are not many climate/energy organizations that work with and represent marginalized communities in Chittenden County, and the ones that are, tend to get pulled in many different directions for engagement efforts so bandwidth may be limited for these organizations to participate in the time we had allotted to conduct the events. Also, the content presented at the events was high level, complex, and detailed, which is a huge barrier for average community members to participate in these discussions. If we had had attendants who did not speak English well or who do not know how this system works, the slides/materials would have been inaccessible for them. CCRPC is still in the process of building relationships with community organizations and refining our policies around stipends and interpretation, which may have presented additional barriers to engaging with other communities.